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ON THE DIVINE ORIGIN OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN MYTHS AND SCRIPTURES

By CLEMENT ANTROBUS HARRIS

TO a musician there is only one alternative to believing that music is of divine origin, and that is to believe that nothing is. It comes to such an one as a matter of course that poets, philosophers and theologians in all ages and parts of the world should have spoken of music as "The Divine Art"; "Religion's Handmaid"; "The Voice of God to the soul" (Canon Shuttleworth); "Herald of life to be" (Swinburne); "The Speech of Angels," nay more, "The speech of God Himself" (Charles Kingsley); and "sphere-descended maid," to give, in the words of Collins, an idea to be found in the works of many, if not, indeed, most poets. Among those who have ears to hear, such passages as the following are but the apt expression of a truism. "It is by the odes that the mind is aroused. It is by the rules of propriety that the character is established. It is from Music that the finish is received" (Confucius, *Analects* VIII. Legge's Edition); "I want another [harmony] to be used by him when he is seeking to persuade God by prayer; rhythm and harmony find their way into the secret places of the soul" (Plato, *Republic*, III. 399-403, *Jowett's translation*); "Let us hear a strain of music and we are at once advertised of a life which no man has told us of" (Thoreau); "Away, away! thou [music] speakest to me of things which all my endless life I have not found, and shall not find" (Jean Paul Richter); "The Master puts into music the thoughts which no words can utter, and the description which no tongue can tell" (S. A. Barnett); "Music is a power transcending all other means of expression of ideals, and of eliciting what is most elevating in thought and feeling" (Arthur Watson). The same idea is conspicuous in mythology, Egyptian, Greek and Scandinavian. The sons and daughters of the Nile regarded several of their many gods as specially interested in music. Their temple chants they attributed to the goddess Isis. (The Egyptian *Maneros*, or funeral chants, are believed to be the oldest music in existence). Osiris also was looked upon as a patron deity of song. In many

representations he is accompanied by the nine female singers whom the Greeks subsequently transformed into the nine muses, just as they transformed Osiris into Phœbus Apollo. Among forty-two "priestly-books" assumed to be the work of the god Thot there are two "Books of the Singer." The god *Bes* (probably a foreign divinity borrowed from Babylonia or Arabia) was honoured as presiding especially over dancing, music and the cosmic art—that is, apparently, music on its more secular side. The Hellenic peoples personified music in Apollo, who learnt his art from the universal god, Pan, and they attributed to it a miraculous power over the forces of nature. The Scalds held that their music was the gift of Odin or Wodin. Among more modern and Christian nations, the nearest approach I can find towards claiming a divine origin for specific melodies is in regard to the ancient chants known as "Gregorian," or "Plainsong." If it is not expressly stated that these liturgical strains were made in heaven, the language used in regard to them—for instance in the Preface to the Altar Hymnal—certainly implies something more than a merely human authorship. Nor can it be denied that the intensely devotional beauty of at least some examples—for instance the traditional music to the *sursum corda*—smooths the way to such a belief. The church historian Socrates, writing about A.D. 440, relates that in a vision St. Ignatius saw the heavens opened, and heard heavenly choirs praising the Holy Trinity in alternate chants, and the venerable father was so impressed with this method that he introduced antiphonal singing into the church at Antioch—this must have been, of course, about the end of the first century. Thus a divine origin is claimed for the antiphony of the Christian church, if not for that of the Jewish, of the singing in which antiphony was a marked characteristic. It cannot, however, but strike a musician as strange that Ignatius should have recorded the method in which the celestial choir sang, and not the music itself. Perhaps he was not musician enough to notice, or be able to retain and record, technical details. Even if he was, one of the strangest things about dreams, and perhaps visions, is the vividness with which on waking one recalls some particulars—often trifling—and the impossibility of recalling others. More probably we are intended to understand that the heavenly music transcended anything possible to human voices or systems of notation.

As a natural corollary to this conception of the most ethereal of arts it came about in the period when myths, and the more mythical element in scriptures, had their origin, that not only

music in the abstract, but the mechanical means of producing it, instruments, were regarded in many instances as of divine origin.

This phenomenon is most conspicuous among the Hindoos, Egyptians and Greeks. The former regarded the *Vina*, to them the most charming of all instruments, as having been given to mankind by Sarasvati, the benevolent and kind consort of Brahma. Perhaps it should, however, be added that though Sarasvati is the generally-accepted guardian of music, the principal God of Hindoo music is Nareda, who is represented as playing upon the *Vina*. Music is closely connected with the worship of the Hindoos: the sacred songs in use are said to be traceable to a remote antiquity, and some are ascribed to gods. These melodies, or "Ragas," are, or were, supposed to be capable of miraculous effects. Some forced men, animals, and even inanimate nature, to move according to the will of the singer, an idea characteristic, as already shown, of Greek mythology. Others could not be executed by any mortal man without the risk of being consumed by flames. The singer Naik-Gobaul, who tried to sing a forbidden Raga, notwithstanding that he took the precaution of standing up to his neck in water in the river Jumna, was consumed by fire. (Whatever conclusion may be drawn from the comparison, it is impossible for the student of the Hebrew Scriptures not to be reminded by this legend of the triumph of Elijah over the priests of Baal, after the twelve barrels of water had been poured over his altar. I Kings xviii.) Another Raga had the precisely opposite effect—that of calling down rain; and by singing it a female singer is said to have saved Bengal from drought and famine.

The Egyptians, as we have seen, had notions in regard to the origin of their most ancient melodies similar to those of the Hindoos. And so they had with regard to their favourite instruments. The invention of the lyre they attributed to the god Thot—a name meaning "Logos" or "Word." Despite this, they did not, according to Apollodorus, dispense in their mythology with the conception of natural means, such as might have been adopted by a human being. The Nile, receding after a flood, left on its banks a dead tortoise. The flesh of the animal being dried and wasted by the sun, nothing was left within the shell but sinews and cartilages, which, being braced and contracted by desiccation, became sonorous when vibrated. Thot, walking along the banks of the Nile, happened to strike his foot against this tortoise shell, was pleased with the sound it produced, and conceived the idea

of the lyre. The earliest lyres, it may be added, were made out of the empty shell of a tortoise with strings affixed to it. In the temple at Dakkeh is a picture which shows that if the fire-god Ptah did not invent the harp at least he played upon it. In the earlier ages of their history the Egyptians placed the goddess Isis-Hathor (Isis seems to have been especially associated with Hathor as a local deity) in an idealistic relation to the tonal art. She was, as Ebers tells us, "the holy goddess of love, the mighty heavenly mother of the beautiful—filling heaven and earth with deeds of benevolence." But in later times the conception of her divinity seems to have deteriorated. She became a mere muse presiding over dance, sport, song and, I fear truth compels one to add, licentiousness. I gather that it was at this period that the rope and tambourine were placed in her hand as representing "the captivating power and joy of love." Flutes are very conspicuous in Egyptian representations of orchestras, and for the discovery of this means of producing dulcet sounds the children of the Nile thanked the great god Osiris.

As mythology is said to have been introduced to Egypt by Thot, and carried therefrom to Greece, one cannot be surprised to find that few if any of the instruments in use by the Hellenes were regarded as of human origin. The lyre they attributed to the same god as the Egyptians, but under a different name—Hermes or Mercury.¹ But with this difference, that, at least in some versions, the infant god invented the instrument absolutely, that is, without receiving any suggestions from accident or nature. And he parted with it to Apollo as recompense for certain bulls he had stolen. Apollo, it need hardly be added, was the god of the muses, the inventor of the cithar, and shared with the Egyptian god Osiris the credit of inventing the flute. The syrinx or "pipe," the prototype of all wind-instruments, is the subject of several myths. According to the most popular it was discovered by the god Pan—hence its names of Pan's-pipes, Pandean pipe and Flûte de Pan. According to others we have to credit Apollo, Linus² or Orpheus, with it. It was an instrument of almost universal usage—the "fistula" of the Romans, the "koan-tfee" of the Chinese,

¹I put it thus since Thot is described as the "Egyptian Mercury." But there seems to me to be a marked difference in the two conceptions. And would it not be more accurate to speak of Mercury as the Greek Thot, than the other way about?

²Though it is said that there can be no doubt as to the actual existence of Linus, whom Usher places 1280 B.C., his life is so shrouded in fable and allegory as to be quite admissible here.

probably the "ugab" of the Hebrews, and the "huayra-puhura" of the Peruvians.

Turning now to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures we find the same idea directly expressed as regards the *designing* of a trumpet; and *involved* in respect to both the designing and making of the harp. Thus we shall add two instruments to the heaven-sent orchestra, and both of them instruments in use at the present day!¹ "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Make thee two trumpets of silver; of a whole piece shalt thou make them" (Numbers x, 1, 2).

And the many "harpers harping with their harps" and the angel sounding the last trumpet, in the Book of Revelation, must, of course, have been conceived by St. John as using instruments made in heaven, and designed there—unless they were copied from those made by men! And surely it is more likely that the human instrument-maker was inspired from above, than the reverse! Lübke maintains that "Early Christianity assumed the garb of the decaying Grecian art," and Emil Naumann, after quoting this passage (History of Music, Cassell's edition, vol. 1, p. 176), goes on to say, "Paintings of this period represent Christ as Orpheus, and as the 'Good Shepherd,' the prototype of the latter being the Greek Hermes, represented as bearing on his shoulders a wether. Orpheus, by his sweet sounds, subdued the demoniacal and animal creation, and Christ, by His loving gentleness, overcame the like evil passions in man. The wether borne by Hermes symbolises the lost sheep saved from destruction in the parable of Christ. Numerous paintings both of Orpheus and Hermes are to be found in the catacombs of the earliest Christian communities of Naples and Rome." Obviously then, the early Christian church was in full sympathy with the belief that the invention and making of musical instruments were among the things of which there has been a "pattern shown in the mount." There is something of this idea, too, in the words of Montanus, the reputed founder, in the second century, A.D., of the sect of the Montanists: "I lie here like a lyre that is played by a divine plectrum." And it is to be found centuries later in the many carvings in old abbeys and cathedrals in which musical instruments of every kind known at the time are represented as being played by angels. A careful examination of a number of such carvings shows them to consist chiefly of the harp; rebeck (a bowed string instrument brought by the Crusaders from the East, precursor

¹So is the Pan's-pipes, but only, I think, by Punch-and-Judy showmen.

the violin); guitar; flute-a-bec (flageolet); cymbal; pipe and tabor (generally played by the same performer); bag-pipe; and organ. An angel playing a bag-pipe formed part of the ornamentation on the crozier presented to William of Wykeham in 1357.

Like every other great idea, I suppose, this conception of musical instruments as among the works which have come direct from the hands of the great Architect of the Universe, has not wholly lacked opposition. It is strange, however, that the antithesis should have arisen in only one religion, and, to some of us, more strange still that that one should have been Christianity! Yet, so far as a very limited acquaintance with comparative religion enables me to judge, such has been the case.

The attitude in this matter of many of the early Fathers, notably St. Jerome, need not concern us here, since their objection does not appear to have been against instruments as such, or their employment in worship, but to certain instruments, particularly tabrets and cymbals, on account of their association with lewd orgies. And the protests, well known to students of English musical history, made about 1150 A.D. by Ailred, Abbot of Rievaulx, Yorkshire, and by John of Salisbury about the same time, were not directed so much against instruments in themselves—albeit the good Abbot seems a trifle jealous of them—as against their multiplicity, and against musical elaboration, vocal or instrumental.

The first objection to instruments on principle did not occur till a hundred years after the Abbot of Rievaulx penned his diatribe, and it appears to have been the chief musical controversy of the thirteenth century. Strangely enough, the instrument selected for attack was that which nowadays is regarded by many people as the only one suitable for use in divine worship—the organ!

It cannot be said with certainty when the organ was first introduced into churches. In the fourth century it was regarded chiefly as a secular instrument, but, according to Cardinal Bona, was also used in church. On the testimony of Julianus, a Spanish bishop who flourished about 450 A.D., it was not only in use as an adjunct to worship in his day, but was quite common. An old manuscript known as the Utrecht Psalter, generally supposed to be of the fifth or sixth century, indicates the existence of organs in England about the same time. It is evident that the King of Instruments was enthroned in the “courts of the Lord’s House” long before the time of Pope Vitalian to whose action, in the year 666 A.D., the installation has by many historians been

credited.¹ Despite the imperfections of the early instruments, they invariably produced the greatest astonishment, and the churches were everywhere ambitious of possessing so efficacious a means of attracting crowds of pilgrims and worshippers.

This appears to have been especially the case in the late tenth and succeeding centuries, when organs multiplied not only in cathedrals but in parish churches and monasteries. Probably it was not the failure, but the success of these instruments which led in the thirteenth century to a violent reaction. A powerful section of the Roman and Greek clergy protested against the use of organs in churches as scandalous and profane. So says J. J. Seidel in his work *The Organ*, published in 1843 (pp. 80-89) and much quoted by subsequent writers. I can find no other authority for the statement, save those who have obviously copied Seidel. As regards the Greek church, however, the only doubt that can arise is as to the *time* when instruments were first wholly excluded, since the music of the Orthodox church of to-day is entirely vocal, and has been so for centuries. Seidel apart, I am unaware of any historian who gives an account of the beginnings of this policy. Antipathy to the organ forms an interesting example of extremes meeting: for it is equally characteristic of the Greek church, the English Puritans of the seventeenth century (who called the instrument "a squeaking abomination" and burnt most of those in England), and the Scottish Presbyterians who, till the last fifty years or so, held the "kist o' whistles" as absolutely taboo where worship was concerned. The small body known as the "Wee Frees" do so still, and pride themselves on it.

Since he is evidently speaking of instrumental music ("without a tongue") one wonders whether good old Isaac Walton had been listening to some puritan fulmination against organs when he wrote:

Music, miraculous rhetoric! that speakest sense
Without a tongue, excelling eloquence,
With what ease might thy errors be excused,
Wert thou as truly loved as thou'rt abused?
But though dull souls neglect, and some reprove thee,
I cannot hate thee, 'cause the Angels love thee.

¹An extraordinary ignorance of matters musical is often betrayed by men of great scholarship in other branches of learning. Thus Bingham, in his *Christian Antiquities* (Bk. 8, C. 7-16) asks us to believe that the organ was introduced in 1290, A.D., and others have copied the error!